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Photos: China's Chang'e-5 Moon Probe Sends Back Samples, Stunning Images From Surface by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Chang'e-5 spacecraft has accomplished a number of firsts for Beijing, including the first extraterrestrial takeoff and first independent placement of a Chinese flag on an extraterrestrial body. When its samples return to Earth, they'll be the first brought back from the moon in 44 years.

China's Chang'e-5 lunar probe has finished its primary mission of collecting moon samples and the sampling capsule is on its way back to Earth. While the ancient rocks and dust won't arrive for two weeks, stunning photos from the lunar surface have already been received.

[The China National Space Administration \(CNSA\) announced on Thursday](#) evening that its Chang'e-5 lunar lander had completed its soil sampling and launched the samples in a capsule into lunar orbit for a separate orbiter spacecraft to retrieve and return to Earth for analysis.

The successful sample launch is the first time a Chinese spacecraft has taken off from an extraterrestrial body. In another first, Chang'e-5 deployed a Chinese flag from a Chinese craft on an extraterrestrial body for the first time.

In addition to its samples, the spacecraft has also sent back stunning photos of the barren lunar landscape, as well as of the rover hard at work and even of the sampling capsule blasting off.

The lander touched down on the lunar surface just two days ago on a spot north of Mons Rümker in Oceanus Procellarum, on the northwestern corner of the side of the moon that always faces the Earth. The location was chosen because its volcanic plain is relatively young compared to past sampling sites, at 1.2 billion years old.

[As Sputnik reported, Chang'e-5 has no internal heating devices](#), so CNSA scientists have had to work quickly to complete their work before the landing site passes out of the sun's light later this month. [CNSA noted the lander has tolerated temperatures](#) in excess of 100 degrees Celsius - enough to make water boil here on Earth.

To take its 2 kilograms of samples, the probe used regolith penetrating radar to select a spot, then deployed unique drills to penetrate the surface and collect the sample. Other items on the surface were collected using a robotic grabber arm.

China's Chang'e-5 probe collecting samples from the lunar surface

The Chang'e-5 mission began with [a blast-off from Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Center](#) on Hainan Island on November 23, and the lander made a soft touch-down on the moon's surface on December 1.

If all goes well, the samples will return to Earth around December 16 or 17, landing somewhere in China's Inner Mongolia region. The samples will be the first from the moon's surface since the Soviet Union's Luna 24 brought back samples in 1976, [in which Soviet scientists subsequently confirmed there to be water on the moon](#) - several decades before American scientists at NASA re-verified its presence earlier this year.

However, Chang'e-5 isn't alone on the moon: two other Chinese landers are also there. The Chang'e-3 rover, which landed in 2013, was China's first to touch the lunar surface and its battery died after nearly three years of operation. However, [Chang'e-4, which plopped down on the far side of the moon](#) in January 2019 - another first for both China and humanity - is still in operation.

In the future, [more Chinese probes will arrive on the moon](#), including planned missions to the lunar poles and one day manned missions.

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US Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Milley Warns 'Next Pearl Harbor Could Happen in Space'  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US has long played off fears of a Russian or Chinese attack in space, but it's the Pentagon that has the most extensive space weaponry and has established the US Space Force (USSF) to maintain that superiority as more nations engage in space activities.

The US military's senior-most uniformed leader warned on Wednesday that the spark of the US' next major war could be a sneak attack against US space assets - a critical vulnerability for US forces around the globe. The rhetoric has long been used to justify the creation of the Space Force by claiming China and Russia pose such a threat.

"Space as a domain, for example, is critical. There is an argument to be made, and many have made it in various unclassified writings, that a country might try to seek a first move or advantage, for example: to blind the United States. The next Pearl Harbor could happen in space, many people have written," Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [told the Brookings Institution during a Wednesday webcast](#).

The real Pearl Harbor incident was a sneak attack by Japanese air forces against the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. The strike destroyed or disabled many of the ships moored at the base, including several battleships, and brought the US into World War II on the side of the Allied Powers.

"So if you took out, say, a series of satellites that were key to our communications systems, our command and control systems, or our navigation systems - precision, navigation, and timing systems - that could potentially have a devastating effect and could encourage some country to try to do something like an 'electronic Pearl Harbor,' with either electronic warfare systems or attack in space," Milley added.

The possibility that US space assets could come under attack and that both the US military and US society at large would be paralyzed by such an attack has underpinned the dramatic expansion of military assets directed toward space, including establishment of the USSF in December 2019.

The Trump administration has cited incidents, including the testing of anti-satellite missiles (ASATs) by China and Russia, as provocative and threatening, demanding greater action be taken to protect US space assets. However, [as Sputnik has reported, it was the Pentagon that](#)



[pioneered](#) a slew of space weaponry, including ASATs and the electromagnetic weapons Milley mentioned.

In one notorious test on July 9, 1962, called "Starfish Prime," the US detonated [a 1.4 megaton nuclear weapon 250 miles above Johnston Atoll](#) - space begins just 62 miles up - which created an electromagnetic pulse that seriously damaged six satellites - one of them Soviet - and even electronics in Honolulu, Hawaii, 900 miles from the blast.

In May, Russian Ambassador to the US [Anatoly Antonov told Zvezda TV that Russia](#) was "doing everything possible to prevent" the US and its NATO allies from "trying to turn space into a combat zone and battleground for possible clashes between our nations."

Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson [Ren Guoqiang has accused the US of trying](#) to spark a new arms race that would "negatively affect global strategic stability."

"So we recognize those threats, we recognize those vulnerabilities, and we are moving at a very, very quick pace and putting a lot of money into shoring up those defensive systems and redundancy, protecting them, hardening them, and also training," Milley told the conservative think tank. "We are assuming that we are going to operate in an electromagnetic spectrum that's degraded," which he said is "almost a certainty."

At an Air Force Association forum last month, Lt. Gen. John Thompson, commander of the USSF's Space and Missile Systems Center (SMC), [noted that for the past three years, the Space Force's budget](#) has grown, and he expects it to continue to do so in the future. In fiscal year 2021, the USSF got \$15.4 billion from the Pentagon budget, but Thompson promised the service's budget pitch for fiscal year 2022 would be "plussed up ... significantly to address users' needs."

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NASA IDs Suspected Near-Earth Asteroid as Centaur Rocket Stage From Ill-Fated 1966 Moon Mission

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

What has turned out to be nothing more than a large piece of space trash from a failed moon mission led astronomers at the US space agency NASA on a wild goose chase for three months as they raced to figure out if the mysterious object posed a danger to Earth.

Astronomers have finally confirmed what they had long suspected: a mysterious, near-Earth object they once thought was an asteroid is actually a 42-foot-long Centaur rocket booster used in a 1966 unmanned mission to the moon.

[NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory \(JPL\) announced on Wednesday](#) the results of some serious stellar sleuthing that proved once and for all that the odd object detected in September is of Earthly origin.

Initially spotted by the Pan-STARRS1 survey telescope in Hawaii as part of a larger effort to detect [near-Earth asteroids that might pose a danger to life](#) on the planet, the mystery object dubbed Near Earth Object (NEO) 2020 SO is a Centaur rocket stage, the top part of a Centaur-Atlas rocket that lifted the Surveyor 2 lunar probe into space on September 20, 1966.

As they studied the new object, [scientists noticed some strange things](#) that should not happen to asteroids, such as that it was being pushed by solar radiation. By tracing the object's past orbital path backwards, they found it passed so close to Earth in 1966 that it could have believably come from the planet itself.

"It was clearly not from a launch to Mars or Venus or any of the others because they would be in orbits that would carry them out toward those planets. It has all of the hallmarks of a lunar mission," Paul Chodas, head of the JPL's Center for Near-Earth Object Studies, [told Space.com in October](#).

At launch pad 36-A, Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, cables help guide the second stage of an Atlas II/Centaur rocket as it is lifted up the gantry (behind it) for mating with the first stage. He explained that the object's orbit makes sense as a lunar rocket because of its speed and angle. "The spacecraft had to slow down, you want to approach the moon fairly slowly," Chodas said. "So the rocket body missed the moon and went into orbit around the sun, just barely." "We've kind of mused about whether [or] when this would this happen," he added. "I've over the years looked at asteroid orbits to see if any of them was in an orbit around the sun that was likely to have been associated with a launch."

Still, it remained to be proven just what 2020 SO was.

A spectral analysis of 2020 SO returned some strange results: it didn't look like stainless steel researchers expected to see if it were a rocket piece, but it did resemble it somewhat. That's when they realized the steel they were looking at it had been in space for 54 years, exposed to radiation and other hazards, and they set out to find a way to verify what such an object would look like now.

"We knew that if we wanted to compare apples to apples, we'd need to try to get spectral data from another Centaur rocket booster that had been in Earth orbit for many years to then see if it better matched 2020 SO's spectrum," Vishnu Reddy, an associate professor and planetary scientist at the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory at the University of Arizona, said in the JPL release on Wednesday.

"Because of the extreme speed at which Earth-orbiting Centaur boosters travel across the sky, we knew it would be extremely difficult to lock on with the [IRTF \[Infrared Telescope Facility\]](#) long enough to get a solid and reliable data set."

Then, two days ago, serendipity: another Centaur rocket from the same era passed before Reddy's team. On December 1, they found a slow-moving Centaur D rocket booster used in 1971 to lift a geostationary communications satellite and compared the spectra they observed with that of 2020 SO. It was a perfect match.

Surveyor 2 was to have been the third man-made object to make a soft landing on the moon. In February 1966, the Soviet Union's Luna 9 became the first, with the United States' Surveyor 1 landing in June of that year. Surveyor 2 was intended to photograph the lunar surface as well as to perform a "bouncing" maneuver, both of which would aid in planning the manned Apollo missions that followed a few years later. However, on the way to the moon, one of the maneuvering thrusters failed to ignite during a course adjustment, sending the spacecraft tumbling uncontrollably through space.

[According to NASA, the craft crashed](#) into the moon on September 23, 1966 - now we know the Centaur booster that helped push it out there kept going and is still flying around today, causing headaches at NASA 54 years later.



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Israeli National Security Council Warns That Iran May Target its Facilities Abroad  
by [Mary F.](#)

The Israeli National Security Council is Israel's main body for the monitoring and analysis of national security. The council operates according to instructions from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In a [statement issued Thursday](#), the National Security Council warned that there may be an increase in the threat of terrorism against Israelis abroad, namely Israelis living in areas near Iran, such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and the Kurdish region of Iraq, as well as the Middle East and the African continent more broadly.

"In light of the recent threats from Iranian elements and in light of the past involvement of Iranian elements in terrorist attacks in various countries, there is concern that Iran will try to act in this way against Israeli targets," notes the statement, originally written in Hebrew.

Israel has repeatedly accused Iran, Hezbollah - a Shia Islamist political party and militant group based in Lebanon which opposes Israel and Western powers influencing the Middle East - and other pro-Iranian groups of being involved in terrorist activities. Israel has blamed Hezbollah for attacks on Jewish people and Israeli targets abroad, such as the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in London in 1994 and the car-bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina, also in 1994. Hezbollah has also blamed Israel for attacks, most recently for the killing of one of its members in a suspected Israeli airstrike in Syria in July, [Al-Jazeera reported at the time](#).

The statement also warns that global jihadist organizations, especially those involved with Daesh\*, are "highly motivated to carry out attacks" against Israelis and Jewish people, stating that locations identified with Israeli or Jewish communities, such as synagogues, kosher restaurants and Jewish museums, are all vulnerable to attack.

"Christian holiday dates, during December 2020 and January 2021, may be attractive for hostile terrorist activity in Europe," the statement adds.

"Against this background, we call on the public planning to visit abroad, including official and business delegations, to be more vigilant (including near Israeli missions, synagogues and Jewish community institutions), to obey the security guidelines of local authorities, to stay away from crowded areas and to avoid public areas," the statement adds.

Relations between Israel and Iran have been especially strained after top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was killed, reportedly by a remote-controlled machine gun, east of Tehran last week.

According to Iran's Supreme National Security Agency, Israeli spy agency Mossad and the People's Mujahedin Organization, an Iranian political-militant organization, were involved in Fakhrizadeh's killing. Israel, however, has not claimed responsibility for Fakhrizadeh's death. Following the [scientist's assassination](#), Iran sent a letter to the UN, saying that there were "serious indications of Israeli responsibility" for the attack and urged the Security Council and UN Secretary-General António Guterres to condemn the killing.

In a televised statement last month, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani threatened a response to Fakhrizadeh's killing, blaming Israel for the killing.

"We will respond to the assassination of Martyr Fakhrizadeh in a proper time. The Iranian nation is smarter than falling into the trap of the Zionists. They are thinking to create chaos," Rouhani said in the statement, [the Associated Press reported at the time](#).

[Politico](#) also reported Wednesday that US President Donald Trump will be [pulling out many as half](#) of America's diplomats from the US Embassy in Baghdad as tensions with Tehran continue to increase following Fakhrizadeh's killing.

Tensions between Iran and the US have been high ever since the US assassinated top Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, in Iraq on January 3.

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TIME Names First-Ever 'Kid of the Year': 15-Year-Old Inventor Gitanjali Rao  
by [Mary F.](#)

Every year, TIME magazine releases a Person of the Year issue that features and profiles a person, group or idea that has influenced the events of that year. The tradition began in 1927 and was called Man of the Year or Woman of the Year, depending on the winner, until 1999. TIME on Thursday revealed its [first-ever Kid of the Year](#), a 15-year-old scientist and inventor named Gitanjali Rao. Rao, a Colorado teenager, will be featured on the December 14 cover of TIME for developing a phone and web tool named [Kindly](#) which uses artificial intelligence technology to identify cyberbullying.

"It's a service called Kindly — there's an app and a Chrome extension — which is able to detect cyberbullying at an early stage, based on artificial-intelligence technology," Rao said in an interview with actress Angelina Jolie for TIME.

"I started to hard-code in some words that could be considered bullying, and then my engine took those words and identified words that are similar. You type in a word or phrase, and it's able to pick it up if it's bullying, and it gives you the option to edit it or send it the way it is," she explained.

The app thus uses artificial intelligence algorithms and natural language understanding, a branch of artificial intelligence that uses computer software to comprehend input made in the form of sentences, to detect online bullying.

Kindly is not Rao's first invention.

Last year, Rao was named to [Forbes' 30 Under 30](#) list after [creating a device called Tethys](#), which uses carbon nanotube sensors, to detect lead in drinking water. Rao was inspired to create the technology in response to the [widespread lead contamination of tap water](#) in Flint, Michigan.

The device is based on the fact that carbon nanotubes in the cartridge are sensitive to changes in electrons flows. When the cartridge is placed in clean water, the electron flow doesn't change, and the smartphone app connected to the device reveals that the water is safe to drink.



However, when the cartridge is placed in contaminated water, the lead in the water causes resistance in the electron flow.

Rao was also named [America's Top Young Scientist](#) when she was in the seventh grade.

"I don't look like your typical scientist. Everything I see on TV is that it's an older, usually white man as a scientist," she told TIME. "My goal has really shifted not only from creating my own devices to solve the world's problems, but inspiring others to do the same as well. Because, from personal experience, it's not easy when you don't see anyone else like you. So I really want to put out that message: If I can do it, you can do it, and anyone can do it."

According to a [news release by TIME](#), Rao, as well as the other top finalists and honorees, will be recognized on December 4 during a first-ever Kid of the Year TV special hosted by Trevor Noah on Nickelodeon, TV Land, TeenNick and Nicktoons. Each one of the finalists will also receive a cash prize from Nickelodeon's owner, Viacom. The other finalists are 14-year-old Tyler Gordon from San Jose, California; 14-year-old Jordan Reeves from Columbia, Missouri; 10-year-old Bellen Woodard from Leesburg, Virginia; and 16-year-old Ian McKenna from Austin, Texas.

Next week, TIME will also select its Person of the Year, which was last year awarded to climate activist Greta Thunberg.

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China's WeChat Reportedly Blocks Australian PM Post as Fallout Over Fake Soldier Image Escalates

by [Victoria Teets](#)

Fu Yu, also is known as Qilin, a Chinese graphic artist who claims to have been behind the fake image said earlier that he created the manipulated graphic as a means of criticizing Australia over the damning Brereton war crimes inquiry, whose military recently released a shocking report describing war crimes by elite troops.

Tensions between China and Australia hit a new low after a fake image of an Australian soldier smiling and slitting the throat of an Afghani child was tweeted by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian on Monday, prompting Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to call it "truly repugnant" and demand that it be removed and Beijing issue an apology.

Although Twitter is blocked in China, it is regularly used by Chinese diplomats. Zhao's tweet, pinned to the top of his Twitter account, was "liked" by 60,000 followers, after Twitter labeled it as sensitive content but declined Canberra's request to remove the image, according to Reuters.

On Tuesday, in a direct appeal to the Chinese people, Morrison took to WeChat to criticize the "false image", while offering praise to Australia's Chinese community, [reports Reuters](#). [Morrison's office reportedly confirmed](#) that the material published on the PM's official account was deleted overnight.

A message from WeChat states that the content “involves the use of inciting, misleading, or contrary to objective facts, text, pictures, videos, etc., fabricate social hot spots, distort historical events, and confuse the public.”

In the WeChat post, Morrison defended Australia’s handling of the Brereton war crimes investigation into the actions of special forces in Afghanistan and said Australia would deal with “thorny issues” in a transparent manner.

Reuters noted that by Wednesday, Morrison’s message had been read by some 57,000 WeChat users.

Morrison also reassured Chinese Australians they are welcome, as well as took a swipe at China over Australia’s response to the war crime allegations, insisting that the incendiary image would not diminish Australia’s respect for the Chinese community at home or abroad.

“The post of a false image of an Australian soldier does not diminish our respect for and appreciation of our Chinese Australian community or indeed our friendship with the people of China,” he wrote.

Beijing rebuffed Morrison’s calls for an apology, with its embassy in Paris on Wednesday saying the fake image was a caricature, noting that France has previously loudly defended the right to caricature.

Australia was seeking to “deflect public attention from the horrible atrocities by certain Australian soldiers”, the Chinese embassy said.

The Brereton investigation [looked into alleged war crimes](#) committed by Australian SAS forces and found there was “credible information” to suggest they had murdered at least 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners, including children.

Australia said last week that 19 current and former soldiers would be referred for potential criminal prosecution, cited by Reuters.

WeChat has 690,000 active daily users in Australia, noted Reuters, and in September told an Australian government inquiry it would prevent foreign interference in Australian public debate through the use of its platform.

Tencent, the Chinese parent company of WeChat, did not immediately respond to a request for comment from Reuters regarding the deletion of Morrison’s post.

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Facebook to Remove 'Misinformation' and 'Conspiracy Theories' on COVID-19 Vaccines  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Facebook’s latest effort to combat COVID-19 vaccine “misinformation” comes days before an advisory committee of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is scheduled to meet and consider granting an emergency use authorization for Pfizer’s vaccine candidate.

The social media conglomerate [announced in a Thursday blog post](#) that content containing what it believes to be false claims regarding COVID-19 vaccines will be removed from both Facebook and Instagram.



"This could include false claims about the safety, efficacy, ingredients or side effects of the vaccines," the post read. "For example, we will remove false claims that COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips, or anything else that isn't on the official vaccine ingredient list."

Disproven "conspiracy theories" related to COVID-19 vaccines will also be removed from the two major social media platforms.

Facebook highlighted that these new policies cannot simply be carried out overnight, as "it's early and facts about COVID-19 vaccines will continue to evolve." Instead, the social media conglomerate will remove content "over the coming weeks" following "guidance from public health authorities as they learn more."

Many netizens have expressed that the move has come a little late in the pandemic.

Facebook previously [announced in October](#) that it would ban advertisements that explicitly discourage individuals from getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

"Our goal is to help messages about the safety and efficacy of vaccines reach a broad group of people, while prohibiting ads with misinformation that could harm public health efforts,"

Facebook Head of Health Kang-Xing Jin and Director of Product Management Rob Leathern wrote at the time.

"We already don't allow ads with vaccine hoaxes that have been publicly identified by leading global health organizations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)."

This increased focus on anti-vaccine ads and content comes as two companies - Pfizer and Moderna - await FDA approval for their COVID-19 drugs.

Pfizer, whose [vaccine produced with Germany's BioNTech was approved in the UK](#), will have its emergency authorization appeal considered by the FDA on December 10. The [Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine](#) has been found to be 95% effective against COVID-19-related respiratory illness.

Moderna [filed documents on Monday](#) requesting emergency authorization for its vaccine, which boasts a 94.1% efficacy rate.

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DoJ Files Lawsuit to 'Stop Facebook's Discriminatory Practices' Against US Workers  
by [Evan Craighead](#)

According to a US Department of Justice (DoJ) release, Facebook "refused to recruit, consider or hire" US workers qualified and available for over more than 2,600 positions at the company, instead reserving the positions for temporary visa holders.

The DoJ [announced in a Thursday release](#) that, following a nearly two-year investigation, its Executive Office for Immigration Review had moved to [file a lawsuit against Facebook Inc.](#), alleging the company discriminated against American workers by reserving positions for individuals "holding temporary immigration status."

According to the court document, some 2,651 positions, with an average salary of \$156,865.50 among the 2,606 positions certified by the US Department of Labor, were only available to employees holding such temporary visas.

Facebook ultimately created a "recruitment process intentionally designed to deter US workers from applying," the complaint stated, noting that the positions reserved for these temporary visa holders did not have online applications and were not advertised on Facebook's website.

Interested candidates would instead have to mail in their applications.

"Not surprisingly, Facebook often gets zero applications for these advertised positions," the complaint read. "And even when US workers do apply, Facebook will not consider them for the advertised positions. Instead, Facebook fills these positions exclusively with temporary visa holders. Simply put, Facebook reserves these positions for temporary visa holders."

The alleged practice occurred between January 1, 2018, through at least September 18, 2019. As a result, the Immigrant and Employee Rights Section of the DoJ's Civil Rights Division is seeking to enforce the anti-discrimination provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act to "stop Facebook's discriminatory practices."

Eric S. Dreiband, assistant attorney general for the Civil Rights Division, detailed that the filing followed "a nearly two-year investigation into Facebook's practices and a 'reasonable cause' determination by the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division."

"Our message to workers is clear: if companies deny employment opportunities by illegally preferring temporary visa holders, the Department of Justice will hold them accountable," he said in a quoted statement accompanying the department's release.

"Our message to all employers — including those in the technology sector — is clear: you cannot illegally prefer to recruit, consider, or hire temporary visa holders over US workers."

A Facebook company spokesperson has since provided a [statement to CNBC](#), saying that the social media conglomerate "has been cooperating with the DoJ in its review of this issue, and while we dispute the allegations in the complaint, we cannot comment further on pending litigation."

Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), a [longtime critic of Facebook and other social media platforms](#), referred to the [litigation as "big news"](#) following the Thursday announcement.

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Photo: Hubble Offers Rare Look at Rapidly Fading Stingray Nebula  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Hen 3-1357, which is also known as the Stingray nebula, is considered the youngest known planetary nebula by researchers. Located some 18,000 light-years from Earth in the constellation Ara, the nebula is as large as 130 solar systems.

Officials associated with the US' National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) gave stargazers quite the shock on Thursday after revealing that the Stingray nebula had undergone serious changes in its appearance over a span of two decades.



Comparing images taken in 1996 against [new photos captured](#) in 2016 by the Hubble Space Telescope, researchers determined that the nebula's bright, blue fluorescent tendrils once photographed were no longer visible in the more recent images. Additionally, the wavy, gaseous filaments that prompted the nebula's comparison to a stingray were virtually gone.

Further research into the fading nebula found that the subject's hydrogen and nitrogen levels underwent unprecedented changes, and its oxygen emissions drastically dropped in brightness by a factor of nearly 1,000 during the 20-year period separating the sets of images.

"This is very, very dramatic, and very weird," Martín A. Guerrero, of the Instituto de Astrofísica de Andalucía in Granada, Spain, [said in a statement](#) accompanying a NASA release on the development. "What we're witnessing is a nebula's evolution in real time. In a span of years, we see variations in the nebula. We have not seen that before with the clarity we get with this view." Although officials indicated that past ground-based observations have shown that planetary nebulae undergo changes in their brightness over time, researchers noted that the latest find is the first time that such speculations have been officially confirmed.

"Because of [Hubble's optical stability](#), we are very, very confident that this nebula is changing in brightness with time," Guerrero added. "This is something that can only be confirmed with Hubble's visual acuity."

The team of researchers who are reviewing Hubble's Stingray nebula archives have also indicated that the subject's rapid fading is likely the result of the expansion and sudden temperature drop from SAO 244567, the nebula's central star.

Although it's uncertain of what will become of the nebula, the team has speculated that it may become barely detectable in roughly 20 to 30 years, should it maintain its current fading pace.

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COVID What? - Political Cartoon

The latest data compiled by Johns Hopkins University indicates that as of Thursday, some 13.9 million Americans have contracted COVID-19 since the onset of the pandemic; however, on Wednesday, the Land of the Free marked both hospitalization and single-day death toll records.

Rather than focusing on the nation's fight against COVID-19, US President Donald Trump opted to release a 46-minute video statement on Wednesday in which he reiterated his allegations of fraudulent votes that he claims cost him the US election.

Calling his remarks "[the most important speech](#)" he's ever made, Trump reiterated many of the claims he's made across social media, such as allegations of ballot dumps and votes being submitted by dead Americans, and even used at least one poster board to demonstrate his talking points.

The video release came just one day after US Attorney General Bill Barr [told the Associated Press](#) that the US Justice Department had found no evidence of widespread voter fraud, a declaration which was previously voiced by the [since-fired Christopher Krebs](#), who served as the director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

Incidentally, the release also came on the same day the US saw hospitalization cases exceed 100,000 and the daily COVID-19 death toll tally surpass 3,100 - 20% higher than the previous record death toll [recorded on April 15](#).

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Photo: New Wooden Phallus Erected on German Mountaintop After Previous Statue Goes Missing  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier this week, following the sudden disappearance of a 7-foot phallic sculpture from a Bavarian mountainside, German law enforcement officials launched an investigation in an effort to solve the mystery. Local lore suggests that the wooden sculpture originally arrived at the Grünten mountain as a result of a prank gone awry.

Adding another plot twist into the disappearance of the 440-pound German sculpture that had stood for several years, reports emerged Thursday that a new phallic-themed figure had been planted in the same spot as its predecessor, but this time with a few add-ons.

Citing local German outlet dpa, [the Associated Press reported](#) the arrival of the new installation, noting that it was “slightly” larger and a bit more detailed on account of the work including two round figures to give the full impression of the male genitalia. Images taken at the snowy site also reveal that the installation includes at least four support beams.

The surprising revelation comes after police in the Bavarian town of Kempten, some 90 miles from Munich, [opened a probe into the matter](#); however, it’s worth noting that it’s unclear whether an actual crime has been committed. The true owner of the sculpture is presently unknown.

The original artwork, which was described as a “cultural monument” on Google Maps, vanished into thin air last week, leaving only a pile of sawdust in its wake.

Oddly, reports of the disappearing phallic statue emerged as many across the world were thrown for a loop when an 11-foot stainless steel monolith [appeared and later disappeared](#) deep within the Utah desert. In fact, similar monoliths were later [spotted in California](#) and even over yonder in [distant Romania](#) before vanishing from those posts as well.

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Video: Shocking Surveillance Footage Captures Moment Arecibo Telescope Collapsed  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

After suffering several cable malfunctions throughout the last several months, the radio telescope at Puerto Rico’s Arecibo Observatory collapsed on itself on Tuesday. The devastating and shocking end to the iconic structure came ahead of the US National Science Foundation’s (NSF) planned demolition at the observatory.



The NSF on Thursday released remarkable surveillance footage that managed to capture the exact moment that additional support cables snapped and sent the 900-ton radio instrument crashing down onto the 1,000-foot-wide reflector dish platform.

Footage [released by the scientific body](#) is composed of two separate clips, the first of which came from a security camera located in Arecibo's Operations Control Center. The second clip was captured by a drone flying above the telescope that had been examining the structure's support cables at the time of the collapse.

The NSF agency, which oversees the Arecibo Observatory, had been conducting hourly drone observations of the telescope after engineers had first sounded off warnings that the aging radio telescope was likely to collapse.

Although a full investigation into the collapse is ongoing, [a statement issued by the NSF to The Drive's War Zone](#) reveals that the telescope's demise came about moments after the cables from the top of the observatory's Tower 4 broke and destabilized the platform.

John Abruzzo, a contractor at engineering consulting firm Thornton Tomasetti, which was hired by the NSF, [told reporters Thursday at a news conference](#) that the work site created a "dangerous situation." He added that "those cables could have failed at any time."

While officials reported that the incident caused no injuries, they did reveal that the sudden development caused some [damage to the observatory's learning center](#), which was struck by falling cables.

The NSF announced in mid-November that it [would be decommissioning the telescope](#) after two major cables had become unattached, and it was determined that the structure was too insecure for construction workers to safely stabilize the site.

The decades-old telescope was considered iconic by the scientific community and had even been featured in the 1995 James Bond spy film "GoldenEye." At present, officials have not considered a replacement for the telescope, which was the second-largest of its kind.

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US Adds Four Chinese Companies to Defense Blacklist Over Alleged Military Ties  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Days after the US media called the election for Democratic candidate Joe Biden, US President Donald Trump revealed he'd signed an executive order that would bar Americans from investing in nearly three dozen firms that allegedly do business with the Chinese military.

The Trump administration on Thursday added four additional Chinese companies to its growing list of blacklisted companies, which now also includes China's top chipmaker Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC) and the oil giant China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

The two other companies said to have ties to the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) are the China Construction Technology Co. Ltd. and the China International Engineering Consulting Corporation. The latest additions bring the tally to 35 blacklisted companies.

"The department is determined to highlight and counter the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Military-Civil Fusion development strategy, which supports the modernization goals of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by ensuring its access to advanced technologies and expertise acquired and developed by even those PRC companies, universities, and research programs that appear to be civilian entities," [reads a statement issued by the Department of Defense](#) in its latest update.

An [earlier partial list published by Bloomberg](#) in June included a variety of shipbuilding firms and construction and technology companies, as well as aerospace-focused corporations. Bloomberg listed companies such as Huawei Technologies Co., the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation and the China Railway Construction Corporation, among other businesses. The latest development comes [just days after Reuters](#), citing sources, first reported that the Trump administration was considering adding the four new companies in a bid to further escalate tensions with China ahead of Biden's anticipated arrival to the White House in January. The executive order, which was issued in accordance with a 1999 defense policy law, effectively bars American investors from putting US dollars into firms that would help to modernize the PLA.

The [November-filed order states](#) that China "is increasingly exploiting United States capital to resource and to enable the development and modernization of its military, intelligence, and other security apparatuses, which continues to allow the [People's Republic of China] to directly threaten the United States homeland and United States forces overseas, including by developing and deploying weapons of mass destruction, advanced conventional weapons, and malicious cyber-enabled actions against the United States and its people."

The order bars either the purchase of or investment in emerging market funds that include the blacklisted companies starting on January 11, 2021. The measure gives investors until November 2021 to fully divest from the listed firms.

China, for its part, has repeatedly slammed the US' actions, saying that Washington has no evidence to support its stance. In fact, earlier this week, the [Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that it firmly opposed](#) the move when reports first emerged that Washington was considering adding SMIC and CNOOC to the blacklist.

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Photos: Divers in Baltic Sea Discover Rare WWII Nazi Enigma Machine  
by [Victoria Teets](#)

The Enigma machine is an encryption device developed and used extensively by the Nazi military in the 20th century to protect commercial, diplomatic and military communications. The devices were regularly targeted by cryptographers of the Nazis' adversaries during the conflict. According to [The Times](#), the wartime machine was spotted by German divers working for the environmental group World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) to locate "ghost nets" left behind by trawlers. The team had been surveying the waters from a motorized catamaran when their



sonar system picked up an unusual signal Gelting Bay, near the German Baltic coast and Danish border.

Gelting Bay is a curve of the coastline of the Baltic Sea on the northeastern coast of the German region of Anglia at the exit to the Flensburg Fjord near the town of Gelting.

While the team initially thought they had picked up a typewriter entangled in a net on the seabed of the bay, underwater archaeologist Florian Huber quickly realized the historical significance of the discovery, [reports Reuters](#).

"I've made many exciting and strange discoveries in the past 20 years. But I never dreamt that we would one day find one of the legendary Enigma machines," Huber said.

The machine, which looks like a typewriter, featured a keyboard and wheels which scrambled messages. "Although several hundred thousand machines were produced, only a few hundred are known to exist," Reuters noted. "They sell at auction for tens of thousands of euros."

A British team led by Alan Turing at Bletchley Park code-breaking center is credited with cracking the Enigma machine's code, shortening the war and saving many thousands of lives, according to Reuters.

The device the divers found is believed to have been thrown into the water in the days leading up to Nazi Germany's surrender in May 1945, when dozens of submarines were scuttled in Gelting Bay so that they would not fall into Allied hands.

Crews of about 50 submarines followed the order to sink their ships in the bay, and destroying encryption devices was part of the order, notes Reuters.

"We suspect our Enigma went overboard in the course of this event," said Huber, who works for the Kiel-based company Submaris, which leads underwater research missions.

Overall, the Germans sank more than 200 of their own submarines in the North and Baltic Seas at the close of World War II.

The recovered Enigma machine will be given to the archaeology museum in Schleswig, according to Reuters.

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US Envoy Claims Iran to Forego Revenge for Scientist's Murder in Pursuit of Sanctions Relief by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Since it seems likely that Joe Biden will become the next US president on January 20, 2021, and Biden has indicated that he supports limiting sanctions against Iran under the auspices of the discarded 2015 nuclear deal, one leading US diplomat says it's likely that Iran will hold off on its revenge for the recent killing of a leading scientist.

Elliott Abrams, Washington's special envoy on Iran and Venezuela, suggested that Tehran is unlikely to immediately seek revenge for the killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a leading Iranian nuclear scientist, because it could endanger the potential for fresh negotiations with Washington if Joe Biden takes office in January.

"If they want sanctions relief, they know that they're going to need to enter some kind of negotiation after January 20, and it's got to be in their minds that they don't want to... undertake

any activities between now and Jan 20 that make sanctions relief harder to get,” [Abrams told Reuters in a Thursday interview](#).

Biden is the projected US president-elect, having retained his lead over US President Donald Trump amid ballot recounts in several states in which the candidates’ tallies were close. Trump has not conceded the race and the official vote of the US Electoral College has yet to take place. Despite the lack of formalities, Biden and many foreign leaders have begun planning for the likely departure of Trump on January 20.

Fakhrizadeh was slain in [a dramatic highway ambush outside Tehran on Sunday](#), his car damaged by another explosives-laden vehicle and sprayed with bullets from, among other things, a remote-controlled robotic machine gun. While no nation or group has claimed responsibility for the attack, a number of indicators heavily suggest Tel Aviv is behind the murder, and two US intelligence officials and one government official [told the New York Times it was Jerusalem’s work](#).

Fakhrizadeh, who headed the Iranian Defense Ministry’s Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND), was a leading scientist in nuclear research in Iran, and [Israel has long maintained that Iran’s peaceful nuclear research](#) was a veil for a secret nuclear weapons program that imperils the region.

Trump, too, claimed that was the case, and in May 2018 unilaterally withdrew the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a 2015 deal between Iran, the US, and several other world powers that saw Tehran agree to give up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for relief from crushing economic sanctions. Those sanctions were reinstated as Trump said they were part of a “maximum pressure” campaign to force Iran back into the confines of an agreement that all other signatories agreed the Islamic republic had never left.

On Wednesday, [Biden told the New York Times he intended to return to the JCPOA](#) framework, because, as he put it, “the last goddamn thing we need in that part of the world is a buildup of nuclear capability.”

Wednesday also saw Iranian President [Hassan Rouhani rebuke some of his colleagues in parliament](#) for passing a bill that would [boost the country’s nuclear output, in response to](#) Fakhrizadeh’s killing. Under the 2015 deal, Iran is allowed to produce small amounts of uranium for medical research and as nuclear fuel in a handful of small nuclear power plants. The head of state said the move was “harmful” and suggested that the MPs were posturing for their constituencies ahead of the June 2021 elections.

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REVIEW - US Congress Targets Nord Stream 2, Turkey S-400 Purchase in New Defense Bill

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The US Congress is taking aim at Russia’s Nord Stream 2 pipeline and Turkey over its acquisition of the S-400 air defense system in the new National Defense Authorization Act for 2021 that has been finalized and is expected to pass in both houses as early as next week.



The compromise legislation, which authorizes some \$740 billion in defense spending, was unveiled on Thursday after lawmakers from both chambers made final modifications to the package. The leaders of the US Senate and House Armed Services committees began talks on Wednesday to reach a deal.

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell are reportedly trying to schedule the bill for a vote in the coming days.

President Donald Trump earlier this week threatened to veto the bill if it did not include restrictions on social media companies. However, the House and Senate reportedly have enough votes to override Trump's veto, with lawmakers in both parties complaining that the provision Trump wants added has nothing to do with defense.

## NORD STREAM 2

Nord Stream 2 is a planned 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry nearly 2 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany. The US opposes the project and has been seeking to export more liquefied natural gas to Europe. Moscow has described Washington's actions, including the threat of sanctions, as a desire for unfair competition.

The NDAA includes language that expands sanctions designed to disrupt the Nord Stream 2 project, according to a joint explanatory statement released by the conference committee.

"The House bill contained a provision (sec. 1248) that would amend subsection (a)(1) of section 7503 of the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019 (title LXXV of Public Law 116-92) to clarify and expand sanctions relating to the construction of Nord Stream 2 or Turkstream pipeline projects. The Senate amendment contained a similar provision (sec. 6231)," the joint statement said on Thursday.

Expanded restrictions target a wider variety of companies, including those that render insurance, reinsurance, underwriting, testing, inspection, or certification services "necessary or essential for the completion of such a project."

Providers of services or facilities for technology upgrades or installation of welding equipment for, or retrofitting or tethering" of pipe-laying vessels are also in danger of US sanctions, according to the bill.

About 120 companies from more than 12 European countries will reportedly be affected.

## TURKEY

The Congress would also require the US federal government to impose sanctions on each individual involved in Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system within 30 days after the new defense spending bill is signed into law.

The legislation also includes a provision that would authorize US Air Force Secretary to use the six Turkish F-35A aircraft that were never delivered to Ankara because Turkey was suspended from the F-35 program.

Since 2018, the United States has introduced a number of measures to pressure the Turkish government into canceling the S-400 purchase, including removing Turkey from the F-35 aircraft supply chain despite the added costs to the program. The United States has proposed buying the S-400s from Ankara in a bid to break the deadlock.

Washington has claimed the S-400 is incompatible with NATO security standards and might compromise the operations of the F-35 jets.

On Thursday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Turkey's purchase of Russia's air defense systems S-400 is no "trap" for NATO as the systems will be fully controlled by Ankara,

#### TROOP DRAWDOWNS OVERSEAS

The new legislation would also require the Pentagon to meet additional requirements provided by Congress before moving forward with a drawdown of troops in Afghanistan and Germany. The US plans to drawdown troops to 2,500 in Afghanistan by mid-January as a result of the agreement struck with the Taliban earlier this year. After reaching the agreement with the Taliban in February, the US reduced troop levels from 10,000 to 8,600 by July, before drawing down to 5,000 by November in a second phase.

Trump, to punish Berlin for underpaying NATO dues, ordered the withdrawal of troops from Germany. In July, then-US Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced the United States planned to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany. Most of those troops or 6,400 people were planned to return to the United States. The move would reduce the number of US troops stationed in Germany to 24,000.

US lawmakers are also seeking to prohibit the Department of Defense from using any of its financial resources to transfer or free any of the remaining prisoners from the so-called "Global War on Terror" held in Guantanamo Bay.

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#### Digital Euro in Demand But Timeline Probably In A Few Years - Lagarde

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - A digital euro is certainly in demand with the spike in contactless payment amid the coronavirus pandemic, but it will probably take a few years for such a cryptocurrency to launch given the security requirements, European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said at a virtual event.

"We have noticed throughout Europe, there is accelerated demand for instant payment, for contactless payment [and] significant use of digital payment of all sorts," Lagarde said on Thursday. "Sovereignty as well as a good control of monetary policy... are all good reasons to explore the opportunity. If you're asking me what is the timetable for that, I would say the job has begun. But equally, I don't think we should move too fast for the sake of, you know, being the first out of the gate. It will probably take a few years before we are safe with it and we can launch."

The ECB has previously said that a digital euro would be an electronic form of central bank money accessible to all citizens and firms – like banknotes, but in a digital form – to make their daily payments in a fast, easy and secure way. It would complement cash, not replace it. The Eurosystem will continue to issue cash in any case.



In a statement released in October, the central bank said the launch of global private means of payment that might raise regulatory concerns and pose risks for financial stability and consumer protection, and a broad take-up of digital currencies issued by foreign central banks.

Lagarde said at Thursday's event that protecting the privacy of the users of the proposed digital euro would be one of the ECB's main concerns, aside from maintaining the sovereignty monetary policy channels.

She disagreed that the ECB was moving too slowly with its digital currency and might allow other foreign central banks, like the People's Bank of China, to get way ahead in the game.

"What I understand is that the PBOC are piloting on a Chinese scale a digital currency which includes, you know, hundreds of millions of users, as is often the case in that situation, and linking up with a service provider. Is it to say that they are about to launch? I don't think so. I think it's still in the experimental stage."

The PBOC has finished building the infrastructure for its Digital Currency Electronic Payment (DCEP) system and has been carrying out local testing in cities, including Shenzhen and Suzhou, although no date has been set for its official launch.

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US, Huawei CFO in Talks Over Plea Deal That Would Allow Her to Return to China - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US Justice Department officials and Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou are currently negotiating a possible plea deal that would allow her to return to China from Canada, the Wall Street Journal reported citing people familiar with the situation.

The report on Thursday said that in exchange for going home, Meng would have to admit wrongdoing in her criminal case related to alleged violations of US sanctions on Iran on Huawei's behalf. She faces wire and bank fraud charges.

The report said, according to the sources, US federal prosecutors could drop charges against Meng if she cooperates in the case. However, so far Meng has refused to cooperate, claiming she is innocent.

The report said Meng through her Huawei spokesman declined to comment. The Justice Department also declined to comment, the report added.

Meng is wanted by the US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

Canadian Member of Parliament Paul Manly said on Tuesday that the incoming Biden administration may be more inclined to drop charges against Meng.

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## Ivanka Trump Accuses Prosecutors in US Capital of Targeting Her for Political Reasons

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Ivanka Trump, daughter to the US president and an adviser to the White House, accused Democrat-led Attorney General's office in the US Capital of targeting her over hotel charges incurred for Donald Trump's 2017 inauguration.

"This week, I spent 5 hours in a deposition with the Democrat D.C. AG's Office, where they questioned the rates charged by the Trump Hotel at the inauguration," she tweeted Thursday. "I shared with them an email from 4 years ago, where I sent instructions to the hotel to charge 'a fair market rate' which the hotel did. This 'inquiry' is another politically-motivated demonstration of vindictiveness and waste of taxpayer dollars."

The probe of the president's use of the hotel under the Trump brand, which is being conducted by the Washington, DC Attorney General's office, comes after his loss in the November 3 election to Democrat Joe Biden.

Over the four years of his presidency, Trump has regularly labeled Congress hearings and other probes led by Democrats into his conduct as politically-motivated and done in bad faith, including his impeachment in 2019 that failed to remove him from office.

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## US Envoy Abrams Urges Incoming Biden Administration to Maintain Pressure on Venezuela

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - President-elect Joe Biden's administration when it takes over must maintain pressure on Venezuela until Caracas is ready to engage in real negotiations, US Special Envoy Elliott Abrams said during a virtual discussion.

"The people of Venezuela have to have a free choice. And I think it will matter if the incoming administration makes it clear that they're going to continue the pressure until the regime is willing to do a real negotiation that leads to a presidential election," Abrams said on Thursday. Abrams renewed calls for President Nicolas Maduro's allies in government and the military to rethink their commitment to the Venezuelan president, saying that previous regime changes in the region have involved amnesty campaigns and indicating that a return to public service is a possibility, if the Venezuelans so choose.

The incoming Biden administration would be inclined to continue the Trump administration's Venezuela policy, Abrams said, explaining that the pressure campaign on official Caracas has been a bipartisan effort.

Venezuela is in the midst of a political quagmire, which began last year after Juan Guaido, then head of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, proclaimed himself an interim president of Venezuela in a bid to oust reelected Maduro from power.

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela reached new heights after the United States recognized Guaido as the president of Venezuela. Russia, China and a host of other nations recognize Maduro as the only legitimate leader of the country.



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**Bechtel Receives 2 US Navy Nuclear Propulsion Orders Totaling \$1.1Bln - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The Bechtel Corporation has won two US Navy modification contracts worth more than \$1.1 billion for naval nuclear propulsion components, the Department of Defense announced in two press releases.

"Bechtel Plant Machinery [of] Monroeville, Pennsylvania was awarded a \$662,216,798 ...modification to [a] previously-awarded contract for naval nuclear propulsion components," the first release said on Thursday.

Bechtel Plant Machinery was also awarded a second \$482,417,574 modification contract for naval nuclear propulsion components, also on Thursday, a second press release said. The total value of both contracts comes to more than \$1.144 billion.

All the work on both contracts will be performed in Monroeville, Pennsylvania and Schenectady, New York, the Defense Department stated. No completion date or additional information was provided on either of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program contracts, the releases noted.

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**US House Speaker Pelosi, Senate Chief McConnell Resume COVID-19 Fiscal Talks - Statement**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have resumed negotiations for a coronavirus economic relief package after an earlier breakdown in talks between the two sides, Pelosi's office announced in a statement.

"The Speaker and Leader McConnell spoke at 12:45 pm today by phone about their shared commitment to completing an omnibus and COVID relief as soon as possible," Drew Hammill, deputy chief of staff for Pelosi, said via Twitter on Thursday.

The talks commenced after a bipartisan group of US lawmakers unveiled on Tuesday a \$908 billion COVID-19 relief bill aimed at breaking a months-long deadlock between Democrats and Republicans over new emergency assistance for small businesses, unemployed people and industries.

Congress reached agreement with the Trump administration in March to pass the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, dispensing roughly \$3 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

Since, Democrats in the House of Representatives led by Pelosi have been locked in a stalemate with the administration and Republicans in the Senate led by McConnell on a successive relief plan.

Presumed President-elect Joe Biden has also said that getting a COVID-19 relief package passed was his number one priority.

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#### **US Congress Requires Sanctions on Persons Engaged in Turkey's S-400 Purchase- Defense Bill**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Congress will require the US federal government to impose sanctions on each individual involved in Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system within 30 days after the new defense spending bill is signed into law, according to a copy of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2021.

"Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall impose five or more of the sanctions described in section 235 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (22 U.S.C. 9529) with respect to each person that knowingly engaged in the acquisition of the S-400 air defense system referred to in subsection (b)," the NDAA said on Thursday.

The final version of the 2021 NDAA also includes provisions that would expand sanctions against Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and the Turkstream pipeline project.

The legislation also includes a provision that would authorize US Air Force Secretary to use the six Turkish F-35A aircraft that were never delivered to Ankara because Turkey was suspended from the F-35 program.

The leaders of the US Senate and House Armed Services committees met on Wednesday to reach a deal on a new defense spending bill.

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#### **US, Huawei CFO in Talks Over Plea Deal That Would Allow Her to Return to China - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - US Justice Department officials and Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou are currently negotiating a possible plea deal that would allow her to return to China from Canada, the Wall Street Journal reported citing people familiar with the situation.

The report on Thursday said that in exchange for going home, Meng would have to admit wrongdoing in her criminal case related to alleged violations of US sanctions on Iran on Huawei's behalf. She faces wire and bank fraud charges.



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**US Congress to Extend Ban on Using Funds to Transfer, Release Gitmo Prisoners - NDAA**

WASHINGTON, December 4 (Sputnik) - The Republican-controlled US Senate is seeking to prohibit the Department of Defense from using any of its financial resources to transfer or free any of the remaining prisoners from the so-called "Global War on Terror" held in Guantanamo Bay, a US House explanatory statement said.

"Extension of prohibition on use of funds for transfer or release of individuals detained at United States Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to the United States (section 1041)," the US House explanatory statement on the 2021 National Defense Appropriations Act (NDAA) said on Thursday.

The Senate amendment contained a provision (section 1031) that would extend until December 31, 2021, the prohibition on the use of funds provided to the Defense Department to transfer or release individuals detained at US Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to the United States, the statement said.

The parallel House of Representatives legislation for the NDAA contained no similar provision, the statement added.

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**US Centers for Disease Control Backs Panel Proposal for Initial COVID-19 Vaccine Doses**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) adopted recommendations from an advisory panel that the first doses of a coronavirus vaccine be reserved for elderly care residents and health workers, according to a press release. "[CDC Director Robert] Redfield supports their recommendations and has signed the memo and accepted these interim recommendations," the release said on Thursday.

On Tuesday, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended that initial vaccinations target 3 million residents in elderly care facilities and a portion of the nation's 21 million healthcare workers.

Health workers such as nurses, whose jobs routinely place them within six feet of other people, would be first to receive the vaccine followed by workers able to follow CDC social distancing guidelines, the Advisory Committee said.

Vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna have applied for emergency use authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration amid expectations of quick approval with first doses administered later this month.

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**US Lawmakers Include Expanded Nord Stream-2 Sanctions in 2021 Defense Bill - Statement**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Negotiating teams from both chambers of the US Congress said in a joint statement that they included expanded sanctions against Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in the final version of the 2021 defense spending bill.

"The House bill contained a provision (sec. 1248) that would amend subsection (a)(1) of section 7503 of the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019 (title LXXV of Public Law 116-92) to clarify and expand sanctions relating to the construction of Nord Stream 2 or Turkstream pipeline projects. The Senate amendment contained a similar provision (sec. 6231)," the joint statement said on Thursday.

The Nord Stream 2 project aims to lay a 745-mile-long twin pipeline that will carry up to 1.942 trillion cubic feet of gas annually from Russia to Germany, passing through the territorial waters or the exclusive economic zones of Denmark, Finland, Germany, Russia and Sweden.

The United States seeks to block the pipeline's construction, which is nearing completion, and imposed sanctions against pipe-laying contractors a year ago, forcing the Swiss company Allseas to abandon the project.

Expanded restrictions target a wider variety of companies, including those that render insurance, reinsurance, underwriting, testing, inspection, or certification services "necessary or essential for the completion of such a project."

Providers of services or facilities for technology upgrades or installation of welding equipment for, or retrofitting or tethering" of pipe-laying vessels are also in danger of US sanctions, according to the bill.

About 120 companies from more than 12 European countries will reportedly be affected.

The House of Representatives and the Senate are expected to vote on the final bill next week.

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**Biden Asks Fauci to Stay on Job, Lead His COVID-19 Response Team - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Presumed President-elect Joe Biden has asked Dr. Anthony Fauci to join his administration and to lead his novel coronavirus team of medical advisers, CNN reported.

Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper on Thursday that he met with Fauci earlier in the day and asked him to continue his current role as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and to serve as his Chief Medical Adviser on the novel coronavirus response team. Biden also said he will ask the US public to wear masks for the first 100 days of his administration.



Fauci is a member of the Trump administration's Coronavirus Task Force, which is responsible for coordinating national efforts to combat the pandemic.

President Donald Trump has authorized the General Services Administration to allow transition for the Biden team, but continues to dispute the results of the November 3 election due to alleged massive fraud and acts of impropriety. The Trump campaign has asked for recounts and filed lawsuits to seek redress.

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Pentagon to Brief Congress Before March 15 on New Lethal Assistance to Ukraine - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The fiscal year 2021 defense spending bill directs top Defense Department officials to brief Congress by mid-March on new lethal military assistance to Ukraine, negotiators from both chambers of the Congress said in joint statement.

"The conferees direct the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy... to brief the congressional defense committees not later than March 15, 2021, on the Department of Defense's planning and capacity to provide lethal assistance to the Government of Ukraine given the current structure of this authority," the statement said on Thursday.

Lawmakers explained that they demand the briefing to include description of defense articles and services to be provided to Ukraine.

The defense budget allocates \$250 million for overall military assistance to Ukraine, including \$75 million in lethal weaponry.

However, it provides for the possibility "to modify the categories of appropriate assistance, broaden the types of reforms intended to decrease corruption, increase accountability, and maintain sustainability of combat capability enabled by such assistance," the statement said.

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US Lawyer Charged in \$12.5M In Somalia Assets Fraud Scam Case - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - A lawyer in the US state of Maryland faces 11 charges of seeking to defraud financial institutions to obtain control over \$12.5 million of Somali sovereign assets, the Department of Justice said in a press release.

"A Maryland lawyer was charged in an 11-count indictment for his alleged role in a scheme to fraudulently obtain control of more than \$12.5 million that was held by financial institutions on behalf of the Somali government, to improperly take part of those funds for fees and expenses," the release said on Thursday.

Lawyer Jeremy Schulman, 47, of Bethesda, Maryland, was also charged with seeking to launder a portion of those funds to accounts for the benefit of his co-conspirators, the Justice Department said.

"Schulman ... was charged in an indictment filed in the District of Maryland with one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud, wire fraud and bank fraud; three counts of wire fraud; one count of mail fraud; one count of bank fraud; one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering; and four counts of money laundering," the release added.

The indictment alleges that from 2009 to 2014, Schulman conspired with others to fraudulently obtain control of financial assets held on behalf of the Somali government around the world and enrich himself and his co-conspirators by taking a portion of those assets in fees and expenses, according to the release.

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#### **US Congress Requires Sanctions on Persons Engaged in Turkey's S-400 Purchase- Defense Bill**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Congress will require the US federal government to impose sanctions on each individual involved in Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defense system within 30 days after the new defense spending bill is signed into law, according to a copy of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for fiscal year 2021.

"Not later than 30 days after the date of the enactment of this Act, the President shall impose five or more of the sanctions described in section 235 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (22 U.S.C. 9529) with respect to each person that knowingly engaged in the acquisition of the S-400 air defense system referred to in subsection (b)," the NDAA said on Thursday.

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#### **California Governor Imposes New Stay-at-Home Order Amid Rising Coronavirus Cases**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - California is imposing a Stay-at-Home order on the entire nearly 40 million population of the state to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus, Governor Gavin Newsom told a press conference.

"To slow the surge of COVID19 and save lives, California is introducing a Regional Stay-At-Home Order," Newsom said. "Regions where Intensive Care Units (ICU) capacity fall below 15 percent will be placed into this Stay-at-Home Order."

Newsome said four out of the state's five regions would hit that threshold in a few days on current trends.

California was facing an increased number of coronavirus transmissions generating fast rising death rates and the ICUs across the state hospital system were rapidly approaching maximum



level, a crisis that had been feared in the spring but that had failed to materialize then, Newsom acknowledged.

"Our ICUs are climbing quickly toward their capacity. Our death rate is rising," the governor said. Newsom said that a first tranche of 327,000 units of the first of the newly developed coronavirus vaccines was being sent to California and that eventually 40 million doses would be sent.

"The message of the day is, as much as you can, stay at home, reduce your interactions so that we can get this transmission rate down," he said.

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#### **Biden Asks Fauci to Stay on Job, Lead His COVID-19 Response Team - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Presumed President-elect Joe Biden has asked Dr. Anthony Fauci to join his administration and to lead his novel coronavirus team of medical advisers, CNN reported.

Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper on Thursday that he met with Fauci earlier in the day and asked him to continue his current role as director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and to serve as his Chief Medical Adviser on the novel coronavirus response team.

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#### **US Adds Four Chinese Firms to List Banning Access to Military Technology - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration labeled four more Chinese companies as being controlled by the country's military, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Today, the Department of Defense released the names of additional 'Communist Chinese military companies' operating directly or indirectly in the United States," the release said on Thursday.

The companies are China Construction Technology Company (CCTC), China International Engineering Consulting Corp. (CIECC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC), the Defense Department said.

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## US House Passes Resolution Calling on Russia to Release American Citizen Trevor Reed

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a resolution calling on Russia to release Trevor Reed, a US citizen who has been sentenced to nine years in prison by a Moscow court allegedly for assaulting a police officer. In addition, the House of Representatives on Thursday also passed another resolution calling on Russia to release all political prisoners while condemning its practice of politically-motivated imprisonment and urging the US government to impose sanctions on individuals engaged in such activities.

The two resolutions, passed by voice vote, are not legally binding but serve as an expression of the House of Representatives' sentiment.

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## US Intel Chief Urges Biden to Let Special Counsel Finish Russia Probe Investigation

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe called on President-elect Joe Biden to allow an investigation into the origins of unsubstantiated charges of Russian meddling in US politics run its course.

"I certainly hope that whoever is running the Justice Department in 2021 will allow these answers to be fully accounted for before the American people," Ratcliffe told Fox News on Thursday. "My hope is that John Durham... will provide the full accounting."

Durham, the US Attorney for the state of Connecticut, has been investigating origins of the Russia probe for more than a year. Earlier this week, outgoing Attorney General William Barr announced he had appointed Durham as a "special counsel."

The appointment presumably protects the investigation from being terminated in a Biden administration because a special counsel appointed by the attorney general cannot be easily removed from the post.

As director of National Intelligence, Ratcliffe declassified a slew of documents that appear to show senior FBI officials improperly obtained warrants to spy on officials in the 2016 Trump presidential campaign.

Charges of Trump-Russia malfeasance ultimately collapsed with former Special Counsel Robert Mueller concluding at the end of a two year probe that no collusion had taken place.

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#### US Defense Spending Bill Requires Strategy to Deliver Hypersonic Weapons Within 3 Years

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The US defense spending bill for 2021 calls for a strategy to deliver hypersonic weapons within three years with an increased flight test rate, negotiators from both chambers of the Congress said in joint explanatory statement. "The Senate amendment contained a provision (sec. 219) that would express a sense of Congress regarding the importance of hypersonic capabilities, require the Secretary of Defense to increase the flight test rate as necessary to expedite maturation and fielding of hypersonic technologies, and require a report from the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering regarding a strategy to deliver air-launched and air-breathing hypersonic weapons within 3 years," according to the document released Thursday.

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#### White House Communications Director Alyssa Farah Resigns - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - White House Communications Director Alyssa Farah has resigned, the Washington Post reported.

The report said Farah submitted her letter of resignation to the White House on Thursday, following her three-and-a-half years working in the Trump administration.

Other Trump administration officials also announced their departures this week.

Scott Adams resigned from his position of special adviser on the coronavirus pandemic to US President Donald Trump.

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) head Ajit Pai said in a statement on Monday that he has handed in his resignation and will step down on January 21.

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#### Pfizer to Only Get Half of COVID-19 Vaccines Out This Year Due to Logistics - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US drug giant Pfizer expects to ship just about half of the COVID-19 vaccines it originally planned for this year because of supply-chain problems, although it still expects to roll out more than a billion doses in 2021, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Scaling up the raw material supply chain took longer than expected, a Pfizer spokesperson told the newspaper on Thursday. The outcome of the clinical trial, the spokesperson added, was somewhat later than the initial projection.

New York-headquartered Pfizer and Germany-based partner BioNTech SE had hoped to roll out 100 million vaccines world-wide by the end of this year, a plan that has now been reduced to 50 million, the report said.

The United Kingdom on Wednesday granted emergency-use authorization for the vaccine, becoming the first Western country to start administering doses.

The two-shot Pfizer vaccine is also being reviewed by the US Food and Drug Administration, where a similar authorization could come later this month and a rollout before the end of the year. The US regulator also is considering a vaccine developed by Cambridge, Mass.-based Moderna Inc. that could begin shipping before Christmas.

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US Lawmakers Include Expanded Nord Stream-2 Sanctions in 2021 Defense Bill - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Negotiating teams from both chambers of the US Congress said in a joint statement that they included expanded sanctions against Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in the final version of the 2021 defense spending bill.

"The House bill contained a provision (sec. 1248) that would amend subsection (a)(1) of section 7503 of the Protecting Europe's Energy Security Act of 2019 (title LXXV of Public Law 116-92) to clarify and expand sanctions relating to the construction of Nord Stream 2 or Turkstream pipeline projects. The Senate amendment contained a similar provision (sec. 6231)," the joint statement said on Thursday.

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White House Communications Director Alyssa Farah Resigns - Reports

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## US House Passes Resolution Expressing Security Concerns Regarding Russia's Prigozhin

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives has passed a resolution recognizing Russian Businessman Yevgeniy Prigozhin and his affiliated entities as a threat to the United States' and its allies' national security.

Resolution 996, passed by voice vote on Thursday afternoon, is not binding, but serves as an expression of the House of Representatives' sentiment.

Prigozhin is accused of having ties to the private military company Wagner Group, which is said to have been involved in the armed conflict in Libya and in other countries.

Prigozhin has denied having any links to the company.

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## SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik)

### OPEC+MEETING

\* OPEC+ has confirmed its agreement on the need to gradually return 2 million barrels per day to the oil market, but the easing of output cuts should take into account market conditions, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Thursday.

\* The OPEC+ countries plan to hold a general meeting of all alliance's states in Vienna on June 25, 2021, in addition to monthly meetings, the draft communique of the OPEC+ meeting said.

\* The agreed increase in the oil output by OPEC-non-OPEC producers is too minuscule and short-term to impact crude prices on the global market, Iranian Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh said.

\* Restrictions introduced in connection with COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect oil demand, and the winter months cause particular uncertainty, according to the draft communique following the OPEC+ meeting seen by Sputnik.

### CHARGES AGAINST JOURNALISTS IN LATVIA

\* Employees of the Baltnews and Sputnik Latvia portals were charged with violating the EU sanctions regime, were searched and given a written undertaking not to leave, Sputnik reported on Thursday.

\* By its actions against employees of Baltnews and Sputnik Latvia, Riga grossly violates OSCE commitments on freedom of speech, the Russian permanent mission to the organization said.

## AFGHANISTAN INCIDENTS

\* An explosion hit the central square of the Afghan town of Gardez, Governor of Paktia province Halim Fadaï said on Thursday.

\* A car bomb explosion in the Afghan province of Paktia killed three soldiers and injured 14 civilians, Abdulrahman Mangal, a spokesman for the local governor, told Sputnik.

## RUSSIAN ENERGY MARKETS

\* Gazprom Neft hopes to return hydrocarbons production to almost 100 million tonnes of oil equivalent in 2021, Vadim Yakovlev, the company's deputy general director for exploration and production, said.

\* Russian oil major Rosneft discovered two fields, gas and gas condensate, as a result of drilling in the Kara Sea, the company told reporters.

## EXPLOSION IN BRISTOL SUBURB

\* A powerful explosion at a warehouse in Avonmouth, an industrial suburb of the southwestern UK city of Bristol, has left multiple casualties, Sky News reported on Thursday.

\* A major incident was declared in Avonmouth after an explosion, apparently involving a chemical tank, the Bristol police said.

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**US Branch of Vitol Energy Group Pays \$135Mln to Resolve Bribery Case - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Vitol Inc., the US affiliate of Vitol Energy Group, agreed to pay \$135 million to settle charges of bribing public officials in three Latin American nations to win contracts, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Vitol paid bribes to government officials in Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico to win lucrative business contracts and obtain competitive advantages to which they were not fairly entitled," acting US Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Seth DuCharme said in the release.

The bribes were paid over a 15-year period. In addition to the \$135 million, Vitol also agreed to disgorge more than \$12.7 million to the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) in a related matter and to pay the CFTC a penalty of \$16 million related to trading activity not covered by the deferred by the Justice Department agreement, the release said.

The resolution also includes a deferred prosecution agreement with the Justice Department in connection with a criminal information filed today in the Eastern District of New York charging



the company with two counts of conspiracy to violate the anti-bribery provisions of the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), according to the release.  
The Vitol Group is one of the world's largest energy and commodity trading companies.

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#### **Maduro Calls on UN, WHO to Declare COVID-19 Vaccines Global Public Goods**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik ) - The United Nations and the World Health Organization (WHO) should declare COVID-19 vaccines global public goods, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said at the UN General Assembly on Thursday.

"President, it is crucial that the vaccine or vaccines to address coronavirus be declared by the United Nations and by the World Health Organization as global public goods," Maduro, speaking virtually, said at the 31st Special Session of the General Assembly in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Global Public Goods (GPGs) are non-excludable goods that benefit all countries and/or deal with issues like global warming that require collective international action, according to WHO experts.

Maduro said the pandemic can only be overcome through a joint response from humanity and based on science.

After becoming the first country in the world to approve the US-German vaccine candidate, the UK authorities announced on Wednesday that the immunization campaign will begin as early as next week.

Other countries, including Russia, have also developed vaccines. Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday ordered his government to begin a large-scale vaccine campaign next week.

Russia emerged as a leader in vaccine development with two of its products, Sputnik V, developed by Moscow's Gamaleya Institute, and EpiVacCorona, developed by Siberia's research center Vector, completing Phase 3 clinical trials.

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#### **US Intelligence Chief Calls China Greatest Threat Since World War II**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - China is the greatest global threat since the end of World War II, US Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe said in an opinion-editorial piece published on Thursday.

"If I could communicate one thing to the American people... it is that the People's Republic of China poses the greatest threat to America today, and the greatest threat to democracy and freedom world-wide since World War II," Ratcliffe wrote in the piece published in The Wall Street Journal.

Ratcliffe pointed to intelligence indicating that China's ultimate goal is global economic, military and technological domination and warned that a bipartisan response is needed to curb Beijing's growing influence.

China not only inflicts \$500-billion worth of economic damage to the United States through intellectual property theft but uses the stolen technology to supplant US businesses across the world, Ratcliffe said.

US intelligence community is shifting resources - to the tune of \$85 billion - to counter the threat posed by China and is embarking on a culture shift with previous generations of intelligence apparatchiks having devoted the bulk of their attention to the Cold War with the Soviet Union or the War on Terrorism, he added.

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**US Sues Facebook for Allegedly Discriminating Against American Workers - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department sued Facebook on Thursday for allegedly discriminating against American workers during the hiring process for thousands of positions filled by temporary visa holders.

"The lawsuit alleges that Facebook refused to recruit, consider, or hire qualified and available US workers for over 2,600 positions that Facebook, instead, reserved for temporary visa holders it sponsored for permanent work authorization (or "green cards") in connection with the permanent labor certification process," the Justice Department said in a statement accompanying the lawsuit.

The release also alluded to a broader practice that is readily described by American technology workers: A foreign worker not only requires less pay, a worker on company sponsored H-1B visa cannot change jobs, thereby allowing a company to avoid turnover common in the tech industry.

"Temporary visa holders often have limited job mobility and thus are likely to remain with their company until they can adjust status, which for some can be decades," the release said. "Our message to all employers - including those in the technology sector - is clear: you cannot illegally prefer to recruit, consider, or hire temporary visa holders over US workers."

Facebook told The New York Times the company is cooperating with the Justice Department but disputes the allegations.

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#### **Facebook to Remove 'False Claims,' Conspiracy Narratives About COVID-19 Vaccines**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Facebook and its subsidiary, Instagram, plan to remove posts with what they consider to be false information or conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines, such as one claiming the inoculation contains a tiny microchip, the company said in a press release on Thursday.

"Given the recent news that COVID-19 vaccines will soon be rolling out around the world, over the coming weeks we will start removing false claims about these vaccines that have been debunked by public health experts on Facebook and Instagram," the release said. "For example, we will remove false claims that COVID-19 vaccines contain microchips, or anything else that isn't on the official vaccine ingredient list."

The release cited another allegedly false claim - that groups are being infused without their consent to test the vaccine's safety - as another example of the kind of posts targeted for removal.

Since facts about COVID-19 vaccines will continue to evolve, the release emphasized the need to regularly update its policies as information from public health authorities becomes available, the release said.

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#### **Pennsylvania Supreme Court Again Denies Republican Bid to Invalidate Some Votes - Filing**



WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has rejected a Republican Congressman's bid to stay the court's order not to invalidate some votes in the November 3 US presidential election in the state, a court filing revealed on Thursday.

"And now, this 3rd day of December, 2020, the Emergency Application for Stay of this Court's Order of November 28, 2020 is denied," the court filing said.

On Wednesday, the Republican party asked the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to reverse its dismissal of a lawsuit seeking to invalidate a number of votes pending a decision from the US Supreme Court in the matter.

US Republican Congressman Mike Kelly on Tuesday filed the request in the US Supreme Court for an emergency injunction to prevent the Pennsylvania authorities from taking any additional actions to perfect the certification of the election results.

Pennsylvania officials have certified the election results, declaring that Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden had won by more than 80,000 votes in the state.

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Wisconsin Supreme Court Declines to Hear Trump Suit Challenging 200,000 Votes - Order

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The Wisconsin Supreme Court has declined to hear a Trump campaign lawsuit seeking to invalidate more than 200,000 votes in the November 3 US general election in the state, a court order revealed on Thursday.

"IT IS ORDERED that the petition for leave to commence an original action is denied. One or more appeals from the determination(s) of one or more boards of canvassers or from the determination of the chairperson of the Wisconsin Elections Commission may be filed by an aggrieved candidate in circuit court," the court document said.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled 4-3 that the Trump campaign must bring its lawsuit to a lower court.

President Donald Trump has challenged the election result in Wisconsin and demanded recount in the state's two largest counties. The recount confirmed the outcome, showing Democratic nominee Joe Biden won in the two counties by more than 360,000 votes combined.

Biden won Wisconsin by more than 20,600 votes overall and the state has certified the results. Major media networks have projected Biden to be the election winner, but Trump has said he won and victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought recounts in some states and launched lawsuits to seek redress. Several states said they found no widespread evidence of election fraud and substantial irregularities.

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## US Court Reschedules Russian National Tyurin's Sentencing, Date to Be Determined Later

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - A US federal court rescheduled the sentencing of Russian national Andrei Tyurin over hacking charges due to technical problems encountered during a telephonic hearing on Thursday.

"We will resume as quickly as possible," Judge Laura Taylor Swain said during the call.

The judge, from a New York-based federal district court, urged prosecutors and defenders to find out the acceptable day and reach out to the court to schedule the new time of sentencing.

The conference started with a delay of nearly one hour as parties were trying to connect to each other. Swain warned from the very beginning that they may be forced to interrupt a conversation due to lack of time.

Tyurin's lawyer Florian Miedel recommended postponing the sentencing due to the inability to talk to his client before the hearing, so the judge agreed to provide them a separate line to conduct conversations.

"Tyurin... believes that he has contracted COVID-19 but would like to proceed by phone," the lawyer said after the conversation.

US prosecutors also asked to postpone the sentencing because of newly discovered circumstances.

"The government just received [a] warrant from one additional victim who would like to seek restitution as well, so the government would seek the additional 90 days to finalize that restitution," Assistant US Attorney Eun Young Choi said.

Tyurin was arrested in Georgia in 2017 at the US government's request. The US authorities alleged that Tyurin was involved in a global hacking campaign targeting financial institutions that resulted in the theft of personal data from more than 100 million users.

Georgia extradited Tyurin to the United States in September 2018.

In 2019, Tyurin pleaded guilty to six counts, including conspiracy to commit computer hacking, wire fraud, conspiracy to violate the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, and conspiracy to commit bank fraud, the Justice Department said in a statement.

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## AT&T Settles Gender Pay Allegations in 2 US States for \$173,000 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 3 (Sputnik) - The telecommunications giant AT&T will pay \$173,000 to correct pay disparities in the US states of California and Nevada for 27 female employees, the Labor Department's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) said in a press release on Thursday.

"During a routine compliance review, OFCCP found that, as of Feb. 1, 2019, AT&T paid 27 female employees who worked in manager network services positions less than their male counterparts. OFCCP contends that these disparities violated Executive Order 11246, which prohibits federal contractors from sex-based employment discrimination," the release said.

While not admitting liability, AT&T agreed to pay back wages, adjust salaries and to take proactive steps to ensure its compensation practices do not discriminate based on sex, race or ethnicity, disability or protected veteran status, the release also said.

The company also agreed to conduct annual compensation analyses across its entire Technical Field Services-West workforce, making salary adjustments as necessary, the release added. The 1965 Executive Order and subsequent labor laws, as amended, make it illegal for contractors and subcontractors doing business with the federal government to discriminate in employment because of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or status as a protected veteran, according to the release.

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#### **Biden Taps Close Allies Zients, Murthy to Oversee COVID-19 Response - Reports**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Presumed US President-elect Joe Biden has tapped two former Obama-administration officials, Jeff Zients and Vivek Murthy, to oversee the novel coronavirus pandemic response, Politico reported on Thursday.

"Transition co-chair and former Obama administration official Jeff Zients is set to serve as the White House's COVID-19 Coordinator and Vivek Murthy, the former US Surgeon General under Obama, will return to that role, but with a broader portfolio that will include serving as the top medical expert and public face of the work," the report said.

Biden's COVID-19 Advisory Board co-chair Marcella Nunez-Smith will reportedly curate the response-team's pledge to address the impact of the pandemic on minorities, the report also said.

The Biden campaign has begun assembling the next cabinet after US President Donald Trump authorized the General Services Administration to allow transition for the Biden team, despite continuing to dispute the results of the November 3 election.

Trump has said he is the winner of the November 3 election but victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump is currently seeking redress via recounts and lawsuits in state and federal courts.

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#### **Trump Administration Sets January 6 Auction for Drilling Rights in Arctic Refuge - Notice**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump's administration will hold an auction for drilling rights in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on January 6, the Bureau of Land Management announced in a release on Thursday.



Trump fast-tracked the process to get the sale done before the January 20 inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden, who opposes drilling in the refuge, media reported earlier in November.

"Today, the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) announced its Notice of Sale for the Coastal Plain Oil and Gas Leasing Program in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR)," the release said. "The Federal Register Notice is scheduled to publish on December 7, setting up the lease sale to be conducted on January 6, 2021 via video livestream."

Drilling in the ANWR was banned under previous administrations until Republicans passed legislation in 2017 that opened up 800,000 acres for lease to oil and gas companies.

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US Sentences Romanian Hacker, Counterfeiter to 40 Months in Prison - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - A US court has sentenced Daniel Gologan, a Romanian national living in Pennsylvania, to a 40-month prison sentence for bank fraud and identity theft and he will be deported from the United States upon serving the sentence, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"Gologan pleaded guilty to obtaining counterfeit debit cards bearing stolen account numbers and PINs in New York, and transporting them to South Abington Township, Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, Gologan and his coconspirator, Costel Aparaschivei used the counterfeit debit cards at Penn East Federal Credit Union and attempted to withdraw approximately \$144,620," the release said.

The operation netted \$66,520 and Judge Robert Mariani ordered the sum to be paid as restitution, the release added.

Aparaschivei awaits sentencing after pleading guilty to fraud- and identity-theft charges, according to the release.

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Trump Refuses to Express Confidence in Attorney General After Failure to Find Vote Fraud

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump on Thursday declined to comment on whether he continues to have confidence in Attorney General William Barr, who recently announced the Justice Department found no sign of major election fraud in the November 3 vote.

On Tuesday, the Attorney General said the Justice Department has not seen any fraud on a scale that could have changed the outcome of the US presidential election.

"Ask me that in a number of weeks from now. They should be looking at all of this fraud. This is not civil. This is criminal stuff. This is very bad criminal stuff," Trump said when asked if he still had confidence in Barr.

In early November, Barr authorized federal attorneys to launch inquiries into credible allegations of voting irregularities before the 2020 presidential election results were certified.

Trump on November 17 ousted Christopher Krebs from his position as the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) five days after CISA distributed a statement from a group of federal and state officials who called the 2020 election "the most secure in American history" and said that they found no evidence of votes being tampered with.

The Trump campaign has filed several lawsuits in key swing states in an attempt to overturn the results of the November 3 presidential election. Trump has failed to prevent key swing states from officially certifying the results while his legal team continues to push allegations of widespread voter fraud.

US media networks have projected Joe Biden to be the winner of the November 3 presidential election.

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US Reduces Visitor Visa Length for Chinese Officials From 10 Years to 1 Month - State Dept

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration has reduced the US visitor visas validity period for Chinese Communist Party officials and their immediate family members from ten years to one month, a State Department official said in a statement to Sputnik on Thursday.

"The Department of State is reducing the maximum validity of B1/B2 (visitor) visas for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members and their immediate family members from ten years to one month," the official said in the statement.

The official said in the statement that the move is related to national security concerns given that CCP officials engage in activities to influence the US public through propaganda and economic coercion, among other malign activities.

In addition, the statement said the CCP sends agents to the United States to monitor Chinese national and Chinese-American groups.

In February, the United States designated as foreign missions a number of Chinese state media that led to forcing out about 60 Chinese journalists. The US authorities also required the Chinese media outlets to notify the State Department of their current personnel and real property holdings in the United States.

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#### US Urges Armenia, Azerbaijan to Resume Work With Minsk Group - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on Armenia and Azerbaijan to continue their work with the Minsk Group in order to achieve a lasting end to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun said on Thursday.

"We urge the Governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan to resume work with the Minsk Group Co-Chairs to reach a lasting, peaceful end to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict," Biegun said at the OSCE Ministerial Council Plenary Session. "This dispute will not be resolved on the battlefield." Biegun also said he welcomed the cessation of hostilities, adding that this is just the first step. "Any enduring solution must be based on the principles in the Helsinki Final Act," he said. In November, Russian President Vladimir Putin together with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, signed a joint statement on the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. The ceasefire agreement paved the way for the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region. Russian peacekeepers are helping to rebuild power lines, gas pipelines, communication lines and transformer substations in Nagorno-Karabakh.

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#### US Sanctions Shahid Meisami Group in Iran - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on a chemical engineering and research group in Iran as well as its director over the organization's alleged involvement in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated Shahid Meisami Group and its director," the statement said. "Shahid Meisami Group is involved in Iran's chemical weapons research and is subordinate to the Iranian Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research, also known as SPND. The United States designated SPND in 2014 in connection with the Iranian regime's proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) or their means of delivery."

The Treasury Department said in the release that Shahid Meisami Group has been in charge of many SPND projects worth millions of dollars that include testing and producing chemical agents and optimizing them for effectiveness and toxicity for use as incapacitation agents.

"The United States has longstanding concerns that Iran maintains an undeclared chemical weapons program," the statement said.

The Treasury Department pointed out that Mehran Babri used to work at Iran's Defense Chemical Research Laboratory before taking his current position.

"Mehran Babri is being designated pursuant to E.O. 13382 for acting or purporting to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Shahid Meisami Group, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 13382," the statement said.



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US Penalizes Power Company 137.5Mln Penalty for Cheating Investors - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - SCANA, an electric utility firm in the US state of South Carolina, agreed to pay at least \$137.5 million in fines and disgorgement over the failed expansion of a nuclear power plant, the Justice Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"The proposed settlement, which remains subject to court approval, would require SCANA to pay a \$25 million penalty and require SCANA and SCE&G [a subsidiary] to pay \$112.5 million in disgorgement plus prejudgment interest," the release said.

The settlement stems from a February 2020 complaint by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) against SCANA, its subsidiary and two former senior executives charging that a project to build two nuclear units would qualify the company for tax credits, despite knowing the project was so far behind schedule it was not eligible for the credits.

The false statements and omissions boosted SCANA's stock price, enabled it to raise rates on customers and sell more than \$1 billion in bonds prior to mid-2017, when SCANA announced it was scrapping the project. As a result, investors lost hundreds of millions of dollars, the SEC said.

SCANA agreed to the settlement without admitting or denying the allegations, the Justice Department said.

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Fauci to Discuss Coronavirus Pandemic With Biden Transition Team Thursday - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci on Thursday will discuss the novel coronavirus pandemic with presumed President-elect Joe Biden's transition team, CNN reported.

Fauci confirmed the virtual meeting with the Biden transition team will take place later on Thursday, the report said.

Fauci is a member of the Trump administration's Coronavirus Task Force to coordinate efforts to combat the novel coronavirus.

Trump has authorized the General Services Administration to allow transition for the Biden team, but continues to dispute the results of the November 3 election due to massive fraud and has asked for recounts and filed lawsuits to seek redress.

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**IMF, Argentina Make 'Good Progress' in Talks on Economic Program - IMF**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund and Argentina made "good progress" in their latest talks on a new aid program, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We recently had an IMF staff team in Buenos Aires to begin formal discussions with the Argentine authorities regarding a new IMF-supported program. As the team said at the conclusion of that visit, there has been good progress in defining the initial elements of Argentina's economic program," Rice said during a virtual press briefing.

He declined to provide specific timeframe for possible agreements, but noted that both sides continue constructive talks.

"As part of these ongoing discussions, a small team from the Argentine economy ministry is indeed coming to Washington for meeting in the coming days [with the IMF staff]," Rice said. Both sides share the view that Argentina needs to implement a carefully balanced set of policies that foster stability, restore confidence, protect the most vulnerable people, he added.

The Argentine economy is suffering significant strains, particularly in light of the coronavirus-related shocks. For the first nine months of the year alone, inflation gained 22.3 percent. Argentina's GDP dropped 19.1 percent in the second quarter of 2020 year-on-year. The share of Argentine citizens beyond the poverty line has increased to 40.9 percent — or 11.7 million people — in the first half a year. This includes around 3 million people living in extreme poverty.

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**US Envoy Khalilzad Travels to Turkey, Qatar to Discuss Afghan Peace Process - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad is traveling to Turkey and Qatar to meet with Afghan government and Taliban delegates to discuss the next steps in the peace negotiations, the State Department said in a press release on Thursday.

"In Qatar, Ambassador Khalilzad will meet with the two Afghan parties as they move into the next phase of negotiations following the successful conclusion of an agreement on rules and procedures," the release said.

Khalilzad will also meet with Turkish officials to discuss Ankara's role in the ongoing negotiations and make undisclosed stops in the region to galvanize support for the peace talks. On Wednesday, Nader Nadery, a member of the Afghan government's negotiating team, announced that both sides had agreed on the rules and procedures governing the ongoing peace negotiations, adding that items on the agenda could now be discussed.

The long-awaited peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban movement have been launched in Doha, Qatar, in mid-September. Progress has been slow amid a series of disagreements and a surge in violence, including armed clashes and bomb blasts, in a number of Afghan provinces.

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## US Weekly Jobless Return to Falling Trend, Complicating Stimulus Efforts

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - US weekly jobless filings returned to a falling trend, according to government data on Thursday that bodes well for economic recovery but complicates lawmakers' efforts to reach consensus for a coronavirus fiscal stimulus. Some 712,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 10 percent lower than the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as the US job market continued to struggle nine months into the pandemic. "In the week ending November 28, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 712,000," the department said in a news release. It revised upward claims in the previous week to November 21 to 787,000 from a previously published 778,000. That dropped the latest week's claims by 75,000, or about 10 percent. Claims rose in the previous week to November 21, rising by 30,000, or 4 percent, to break four weeks of declines prior to that.

Data on the latest filings came after a bipartisan group of US lawmakers unveiled a \$908 billion COVID-19 relief bill aimed on Tuesday at breaking a monthslong deadlock between Democrats and Republicans over new emergency assistance for small businesses, unemployed people and industries.

Congress reached agreement with the Trump administration in March to pass the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) stimulus, dispensing roughly \$2.2 trillion as paycheck protection for workers, loans and grants for businesses and other personal aid for qualifying citizens and residents.

Since then, Democrats in the House of Representatives have been locked in a stalemate with the administration and Republicans in the Senate on a successive relief plan to CARES. The dispute has basically been over the size of the next stimulus as thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risked losing their jobs without further aid. With President-Elect Joe Biden set to take office on January 20, talks have, however, resumed for a new stimulus package.

Continuous jobless claims for the latest week in review showed fewer filings from the previous week. Some 5.52 million Americans were on continuous claims for the week ended November

28, versus 6.09 million during the week to November 21. The unemployment rate for last week, meanwhile, stood at 3.8 percent, down 0.4 percentage point from the previous week.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of lockdowns forced by the COVID-19. A rebound of 2.5 million jobs was logged in May and 4.8 million in June, before the recovery began slowing. For both September and October, fewer than 700,000 jobs were added.

The US economy grew by 33.1 percent in the third quarter, after shrinking by 31.4 percent in the previous three months and 5 percent in the first quarter.

Despite the rebound, the economic outlook for the United States remains dire with a rash of new coronavirus infections reported across a nation with nearly 14 million COVID-19 cases since January and more than 273,000 fatalities from that. Hospitalization has also hit daily record highs of above 100,000 in recent weeks, even as vaccine development efforts have been showing promise.

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#### Harris Appoints Senior Members of White House Staff – Transition Team

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) – Presumed US Vice President-elect Kamala Harris has appointed senior members of her team including a chief of staff and a national security adviser, the transition team said in a statement on Thursday.

"Leading my office as Chief of Staff will be Tina Flournoy, whose deep experience, public policy expertise, and accomplished career in public service make her uniquely qualified for this important position," Harris said in the statement.

Nancy McEldowney will serve as Harris' national security adviser, while Rohini Kosoglu will take the position of domestic policy adviser, she added.

"Together with the rest of my team, today's appointees will work to get this virus under control, open our economy responsibly and make sure it lifts up all Americans, and restore and advance our country's leadership around the world," Harris said.

Flournoy currently serves as chief of staff to former President Bill Clinton. Prior to that appointment, she held a number of positions in the Democratic Party, including under the Clinton administration.

Kosoglu currently serves as senior adviser to the Harris team, while McEldowney held the positions of US ambassador to Bulgaria and as charge d'affaires and deputy chief of mission in Turkey and Azerbaijan.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Fall to 712,000 for Week to Nov. 28 - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 3 (Sputnik) - Some 712,000 Americans filed for jobless benefits last week, about 10 percent lower than the previous week, Labor Department data showed on Thursday, as the US job market continued to struggle nine months into the coronavirus pandemic.

"In the week ending November 28, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 712,000," the department said in a news release. It revised upward claims in the previous week to November 21 to 787,000 from a previously published 778,000. That raised/dropped the latest week's claims by 75,000, or about 10 percent.